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ABSTRACT

This paper explains the method and value of critical aesthetic inquiry when researching the teaching of art. The paper contends that teaching is an art, and the only appropriate way to research art practice is through an artistic approach to critical inquiry. The paper explains how art education research is distinctive from scientific research. It then explains the framework of critical aesthetic inquiry, including the basic theory, data gathering instruments, and methods of analysis. It addresses the methodology's limitations and realms of effective application. (Contains 27 references.) (BT)

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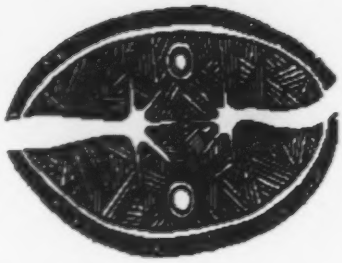

InSEA

"A Dream of Red Mansions: Researching the Art of Generalist Art Teaching"

by

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A Dream of Red Mansions: Researching the art of generalist art teaching.

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Recent debates have centered on the need for strong and persuasive evidence of the value and worth of artistic learning. In an era of outcomes-based programming, economic rationalism, and national curricula, art education research has been shaped by the demands for relevance and accountability. "A Dream of Red Mansions" by Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo is a Chinese novel that traces the fortunes of a privileged few that live in the 'Red Mansion' and the poor multitudes that dream of the life within the sacred walls. Art education research has been dominated by the 'red mansion' of scientific research and art researchers have found themselves having to make their questions 'fit' a scientific paradigm or have their research exist in the world outside the 'red mansion', receiving little credence or credit. It is the contention of this paper to demonstrate that the modernist view of science, as a premise for research into art education is not valid and that a conception of art education research must be promoted that views art education as an art form, that should be researched using art-based methodology. Within this model, education exists as a human and socio-cultural practice that is creative, practical and value-laden. It is inappropriate to commence art education research from a positivist, value neutral way. The character of art education is such that it defies imposed order and rationality but rather implies 'impressions', 'choices' and 'character'. These concepts are embedded in the affective and intuitive domains. Arnheim (1986) writes about a form of intelligence whereby analytical and intuitive thought work together to paint a picture of a given percept. It is within this form of knowing and the socio-cultural framework of this intelligence that art research should be located. It is impossible to escape the value-ladeness of research to adopt a more scientific, impersonal approach to research. Ways of knowing are "inherently culture-bound and will therefore reflect the dominant values of the particular culture in which they are located" (Usher, 1996: p 29).

The particular study I am undertaking involving **critical aesthetic inquiry** entails two distinct parts to the research. Initially, the research aims to elicit a detailed picture of current practices in art education in order to generate theories about how teachers view art learning and actually teach in the New South Wales elementary class setting. The subsequent part of the research involves determining salient principles of primary art learning within sociocultural contexts and distilling these into a framework for future art education strategies for generalist teacher education. Modernist ideas of the "best way" to teach art are not applicable when the reality of art education is highly unstable and contingent and any notions of best practice would be constantly changing and mutating inline with changing educational conditions. Research has changed from being a route to individual and collective enlightenment to a situation where the meaningful questions of the field are never asked as such questions have fallen prey, "to the methodological prohibitions of positivism" and are believed to be "beyond the scope of science and were thus unexamined" (Carr and Kemmis, 1983: p 132). The combined result of reductionist notions in art research has been the de-skilling of art researchers and the loss of imaginative and insightful research. Art researchers often feel a lack of ownership of their investigation and find their enforced methodology removing them from the realities of the field (Cunliffe, 1990: p 287).

As Usher (1996: p 17) contends, the world is not stable, or orderly. Educational realities are holistic, indivisible and in flux. The tentativeness and uncertainty that surrounds pluralistic practices further exacerbate the dynamic nature of postmodernist conceptions of art education. Multiple realities exist and it is difficult to map these realities when changes that occur in art education practice cannot be effectively explained through rational accounts and where not all actions are deliberate or meaningful.

Teaching is an ART not a craft or a science.

It is the contention of this paper that teaching is an **art**, not a craft or a science and therefore the only appropriate way to research art practice is through an artistic approach to critical inquiry. There is a discrepancy between art educational practice and the practice of educational research. The distinctive nature of art education research does not easily fit into the broader paradigm of educational research. Both teaching and art involve creativity (Anderson, 1997: p 38). As a spontaneous, creative act, teaching, by its nature, implies the presence of an element that cannot be known in advance of the work. Aesthetic research practices must be holistic and cannot be dependent on cause and effect. Imagination and an innate 'aestheticness' are implicit in inspirational teaching practices. Teaching art is a reflective artform subject to

change as the skills and knowledge of the participants change. Like all art forms, art teaching is influenced by social and historical contexts and by critical interactions.

Craft-like definitions imply that there is a preconceived pattern to follow towards effective teaching, and that through this set of competencies there is a predetermined means to an end. In a 'craft' orientation to learning, students are perceived as an inanimate lump of clay that can be skillfully manipulated into a prescribed shape. In this technical definition of art education, productive teaching is seen as a determinant of success and process, techniques and systems are highlighted. Eisner (1985: p 176) suggests that teaching is a distinctive art form that should be studied within the paradigm of aesthetic practice; "teaching itself can be understood as an art when teachers, as do dancers, musicians or painters make judgements based largely on qualities that unfold during the course of action." Anyone who has ever tried to teach art (at any level) would certainly agree that rarely do planned teaching and learning sequences follow the written descriptions and that some of the best lessons occur as the result of chance encounters that form the catalyst for truly significant learning opportunities. It is from this stance that research into art education is conceived as a form of critical aesthetic inquiry that is grounded in the nature of art practice.

Is art education research distinctive?

It has only been in recent times that research would be conceived in a way that separates the rational from the instinctive. There is indeed a lot of science in good art and good science is based on artistic premises of imagination and creativity. Yet, scientific and artistic research practices have evolved to a point where they are now quite distinct. The difference between scientific and artistic research is clearly articulated in Sherman and Lincoln (1982: p 2):

> *The function of the scientific method is primarily nomothetic, while the function of arts education is primarily ideographic, relying on the ideographic, the intensely personal , and experimental, and the expressive.*

Scientific 'truth' is objective and generalizable, while artistic truth is based on insight into the human condition. Artistic truth relies on the generation of new ideas and aesthetic interpretation operates in conjunction with people and the context. Knowledge in art is characterized by an acceptance of contradiction and collaboration. It goes beyond what is perceived to include what is sensed. Truth, in art research, is an individual response requiring both intuition and intellect. The aim of art education research is to gain knowledge of the broader learning enterprise that is called 'art'. It is as much about asking questions as it is about finding solutions. Art education research should broaden, (not simplify) definitions of art, learning and 'teaching' and inform the broader educational community about the inherent qualities of education that are artistic and aesthetic.

Researching art education calls for approaches that are, "more expressive and less instrumental. Which are capable of deriving meaning from experience and which are holistic rather than fragmented" (Sherman and Lincoln, 1982: p 2). Both art and education are about sensation, feeling, intuition and thought. The function of art education is to capture the essence of human experience in a form that makes the indeterminate 'known' at a level that combines intuitive vision with a more cultivated approach to aesthetic comprehension. Gaining insight into art education practice is most effectively achieved through an approach that unifies the nature of art and the artists' world with the knowledge consistent with the practices of research inquiry. An art-based research methodology therefore, describes a particular perspective on 'knowing'. It must be viewed within a context, and that context needs to be adequately represented from the viewpoint of the inherently artistic qualities present.

It should be noted at this point, that I did not begin this study with the idea that I would develop a new research methodology. I knew the aim of my Ph.D. study and had a reasonably coherent idea of the sequence of experiences that were likely to enable me to address the stated problem. As I surveyed the available research methodologies for one that would closely approximate my intentions, I felt a growing sense of unease with the available options. I realized that what was inappropriate with existing research structures was the point of view, or 'frame', in which they were positioned. The adequacy of a research methodology is determined by its capacity to resolve art educational problems and to improve educational practice. To this end, I found my investigation into appropriate methodology returning to the source of art education, that is, the artists' practices. From examining how artists 'research' the art making process and considering my personal approaches to art production, I found consistencies in the fundamentals of critical aesthetic inquiry. Interestingly, similar attributes and methodologies also appeared in the practice of art historians and critics. It is from this point that I began to feel a sense of appropriateness of methodology. While usually used to study works of art, **critical aesthetic inquiry** offered me a way forward in my art educational research. It also became evident that aesthetic inquiry was a model of research design where there was a "fit between the cultural conditions surrounding the issues being investigated and the methodological process" (Stewart, 1997: p 224).

Art education research involves exploring teaching styles, preparations, beliefs, abilities and interests of the participants. Like art making, art education research relies on direct and personal encounters with the research context. The researcher should become personally involved in his or her investigation (Burns, 1990: p 223). Critical aesthetic inquiry alludes to Chompsky's notion of 'deep structure' that must by necessity take the researcher beyond linear methodological recipes. Just as the artists expands skills and conceptual awareness in his/her personal art making journey, so too does the art education researcher become a more skilled perceiver and thoughtful analyzer through actively participating in the research. Aesthetic perception involves the total person and is very much an intellectual, sensual and responsive act that exists in a two-way relationship between the researcher and what is being researched. It is a complex procedure that becomes refined through repeated exposure and challenging circumstances. As Dewey notes, "to learn to see anything well is a difficult undertaking. It requires the activity of the whole personality." (Dewey, 1947: p 7).

Critical aesthetic inquiry

Critical aesthetic inquiry combines the open-ended, recursive approach of critical inquiry (Geahigan, 1998: p 12) with the affective and perceptual analysis apparent in aesthetic investigation (Broudy, 1976). Aesthetic inquiry is constructed around the notion of a pathway of investigation that focuses on the meaning, nature and truth of a given situation. Aesthetic inquiry is both a cognitive and intuitive activity. It is a process of establishing meaning through multiple constructed realities (Anderson, 1991: p 17). Aesthetic perception involves seeing as an artist sees. It involves perceptual mechanisms combined with sophisticated judgements. It is about making connections and relationships between various elements.

Aesthetic inquiry involves perceiving the metaphoric or analogous within a situation and is based on insight into significant examples of non-literal communication. Critical aesthetic research is organized around notions of meaning, value and understanding. It involves critical reflection to isolate the important questions in art education and then assess the worth or merit of a given situation to determine appropriate future actions. The focus of critical aesthetic inquiry is on the complexities and qualities in educational action and interaction as viewed from a subjective frame. Aesthetic research assumes that personal experiences reflect meaning, rather than truth, that are presented in the multiple realities within a specific art education context. Plato described this as an understanding of 'form' that is something special or beautiful; the 'soul' of a situation which includes aspects such as balance, rhythm, contrast, theme, variation, unity and complexity.

A critical aesthetic inquiry involves examining below surface behaviours to the exploration of deeper linguistic constructs concerned with meaning and significance. Representing feelings and observations through language is a metaphoric, poetic process. Writing, like art is a communicative device that allows coherent chunks of perceptual, cognitive, emotional and experiential characteristics to be effectively communicated to a broader audience. To be able to research the communicative and symbolic aspects of art education practice, the methodological approach selected needs to combine detailed perceptions of the observable characteristics of the situation that are overtly accessible to the external eye with the more emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of artistic practice. The difficulty inherent in critical aesthetic inquiry is the paradox that art education is both a **product** (evident of meanings and actions) but also a **catalyst** (that produces meanings and actions.) This paradox behest a methodological approach that is based on active rather than passive inquiry and that combines acuteness of perception with the admission of tacit knowledge such as insight, intuition and apprehension. Read (1954: p 26) described this sort of approach as the "vitality of thought that is dependent on feeling."

Contextualism in critical aesthetic inquiry

The context in which research is undertaken includes both the participants in the research community and is a product of many socially and historically linked practices. Education is a socio-cultural activity (Carr and Kemmis, 1983, Freedman, 1998). Research in art education involves presenting subjective meanings in an abstracted form where truth and action are socially constructed and historically embedded. Actions can only be validly interpreted within a context. Just as DeKooning's chains are only chains until they are placed in a context that defines them as art, siting the research is a very important aspect of critical aesthetic research. Theory is embedded in a highly complex manner in the actions of generalist art teachers. Using a model based from the field of aesthetics, the researcher consults historical and critical writings in order to inform the viewing of a 'work'. This context is established through review and critical analysis of published literature in the field, including a detailed interpretation of historical influences. It should be noted at this point , that the context of socio-cultural aesthetic research goes beyond the physical and cultural context of the given area to be investigated, to include the broader social context of the society in which a system operates. Art education both challenges and imitates society's ideas, beliefs and values. Practices reflect personal, political, conceptual and technological 'frames'. Under post-modernist theoretical constructs, critical aesthetic inquiry is based on pluralistic approaches. 'Frames' have been used to show that a particular piece of research can be simultaneously viewed from a range of contexts. For example, from the subjective context, the researcher focuses on personal reactions to a situation and the manner in which empirical

evidence apparent in the field effects the researcher. From a cultural frame, the researcher focuses on interpreting data from a cultural perspective, looking at the social history surrounding examples of a practice. From a postmodern frame, the context of the research exists in underlying meanings, metaphor and appropriation.

Humanizing the abstraction process

The quality of inquiry in art education is dependent upon the establishment of a research community that positions both researchers and classroom teachers in the theoretical construct of being partners in a self-critical community. While practitioners are central to shaping all educational practice, when researcher generalist primary teachers and arts it is extremely vital that there is negotiation between the observer and the observed and that the participants are considered as working in collaboration with the researcher. Primary teachers frequently feel very insecure with their ability to effectively teach art and if they were to feel that a researcher was watching them with a critical eye, most would be very reluctant to participate, and probably those who did consent to join the research would behave in an unnatural way as the result of perceived power structures between the researcher and the participant. Successful aesthetic research implies learning from people, rather than just studying them (Stokrocki, 1998: p 11). Participants become cooperators with the researcher in the quest for knowledge (Carr and Kemmis, 1983). Critical aesthetic inquiry is a form of democratic investigation that acknowledges the influence participants have on the conditions of their lives and work.

Data gathering instruments

The main characteristic of the data gathering tools is the epistemological link between the problem, including the nature of visual arts practice and the methods selected. Critical aesthetic inquiry attempts to represent knowledge in an artistic, rather than scientific way. A significant part of critical aesthetic inquiry is the analysis of the research strategies as they represent a process of aesthetic learning. Methodological approaches emphasize openness to the unexpected and flexibility. The data collection is both generative and exploratory.

There are two main strategies being employed in data collection, observation and conversations (both formal and informal).

a) Observation:

The researcher is aware of the ways in which observation alters reality. There are inherent difficulties in obtaining information that is primarily based around experiences, images and intuitions, yet these are crucial influences on ideas and perceptions of quality. The act of observing changes the object being observed. A two-way relationship exists between the research participant and the researcher, and this relationship is defined through encounters with the educational context. It should be noted that the framework in which observations occur is not neutral. Observation is a highly value-laden data collection instrument. In a critical aesthetic inquiry, the researcher becomes a shared participant in the research. In traditional qualitative measures, the researcher tries to avoid making a presence in the research context. By contrast, from an aesthetic point of view, the person viewing the 'art work' (or in this case observing the art education practice) is recognized as being a socially critical individual who brings to the observation process all their background knowledge and intuitive responses. Observation is recognized as being a cognitive process that is reliant on sensory and affective responses. Observations are informed by contextual and critical understandings and there is a sense that familiarity and intimacy with the 'work' being observed assists the researcher to make valid and meaningful responses. The refinement of ideas can begin where imagery, metaphor, intuitive hunches, kinesthetic feeling, emotional state and even dreams are proponent (Marshall: 1994).

b) Conversations:

There exists a problem of **'voices'** in all forms of qualitative research involving communication with a group of research participants. The researcher is forced to make decisions about whose voice is listened to and whose is suppressed. The results of such research can easily be distorted by the selective dialogue attributes of the researcher. As an alternative, the work of Foucault (1980) looks more at the genealogy of 'voices', where the history of ideas or systems of thought are traced. Such an approach allows the research to critically interpret 'voices'. By tracing the evolution of ideas, it is possible to not only decide **WHO** should speak, but also to determine from **what position** they speak. This raises the difficulty of hidden and espoused agenda, where conditioned principles may act as tacit determinants. It is not easy to explicate the links between teachers' thoughts and actions to reveal consistent meta-narratives.

Analysis of research

In a critical aesthetic inquiry, the assumption is made that translation of data is not independent of interpretation. As a form of qualitative research, critical aesthetic inquiry is concerned with the effects of the researcher's subjectivity on the data produced. Interpretation of critical aesthetic data encompasses hermeneutic, contextual, literary and critical approaches to understanding, interpreting and describing

generalized qualitative events. Philosophical hermeneutics as a model form analysis is based on a deconstruction centered on the perceiver, where the perceiver becomes a creative entity in the interpretation process (Anderson, 1991). Analysis in critical aesthetic inquiry involves both personal and theoretical sensitivity. There is a clear nexus between theory and practice at all points of the research, and the research is analyzed in terms of the way it will influence future practice. Resolutions and consequences emerge from a critical aesthetic approach to research, so, as with action research, the ultimate aims of critical aesthetic inquiry are to improve and involve (Carr and Kemmis, 1983: p 165). As Carr and Kemmis (1983: p 130) state in relation to educational problems;

> (They must be) *orientated towards transforming the situations which place obstacles in the way of achieving educational goals, perpetuate ideological distortions, and impede rational and critical work in educational situations*

Critical aesthetic inquiry is a practical form of investigation, the purpose of which is to change art education in some desirable ways. Such analysis is intended to promote an art teacher education pedagogy that enables teachers to understand existing practices, yet at the same time contribute positively and reflectively to "the evolving art education pedagogy so necessary for change within schools" (Galbraith, 1993: p 7). The problem being addressed in this research is the nature of generalist art practices and the manner to which teacher education pedagogues could be enhanced. Analysis within critical aesthetic inquiry implies changing practices and promoting new courses of action. (Carr and Kemmis, 1986: p 108) writes of the active dimension of analysis in critical research;

> (Educational) *problems are always practical problems, which unlike theoretical problems, cannot be resolved by the discovery of new knowledge, but only by adopting some course of action.*

Critical aesthetic inquiry could therefore be considered as an interventionist form of investigation. It implies strategic action. The initial problem that motivated the research is not resolved through the discovery of knowledge. Rather it is about formulating and acting upon creative, imaginative and practical judgements made as a result of the knowledge gained throughout the research process. As Gauthier (in Carr and Kemmis, 1986 p 108) states, "practical problems are problems about what to do...their solution is found only in doing something."

Data analysis

Standard patterns of data analysis and reporting can disguise as much as they reveal (Burns, 1990). A post-modernist view of data analysis with critical aesthetic inquiry involves more complex associations and connections (Freedman, 1998: p 5). Data analysis in critical aesthetic methodology focuses on both relationships and the space between relationships. Data analysis is based on reflexivity, where description and analysis of the research process itself forms part of the reporting of data. Critical aesthetic inquiry examines both stable and changing patterns of operation. This form of analysis can most effectively be achieved through organizing data into themes. These themes are based on contextual and historical theoretical research and practical patterns that emerge through the progress of the research.

Validity of critical aesthetic inquiry as a methodology for investigating art education.

As with all other research methodologies, critical aesthetic inquiry has both inherent limitations and context-dependent limitations. The main limitations apparent are a lack of focus, problems with the theory/praxis nexus and limitations associated with the researcher.

Focus

To be a valid form of research, critical aesthetic inquiry must be an appropriate methodology to research a particular condition. It must be both culturally and discipline relevant. Multi-faceted and rigorous approaches to gathering data should assist in examining the assumptions and values that constitute bodies of knowledge and modes of action in art education. Effectiveness of a research methodology is judged according to its originality, sensitivity and significance. Critical aesthetic inquiry involves multi-layered meanings that are indicative of conceptual complexity and depth of meaning (Freedman, 1998: p 7). To be valid, there must be a clear justification for the research. This justification should come from contemporary research, contextual understandings and a strong sense of personal interest. Critical aesthetic inquiry should have practical and policy implications and contribute to research and thinking in the field. The results of critical aesthetic inquiry should be subjected to crucial scrutiny. Usher (1996: p 24) describes valid research practice as, "having the 'right' arguments and being prepared and able to subject them to the scrutiny of contrary dialogue."

Theory Practice Nexus

A major limitation of critical aesthetic inquiry is that all meaning is embedded in a given context and so there can be no supposition of an objective reality. Generalization is not possible since human behaviour and experiences are never time or context free and are thus not transferable. The problems of transferability are paradoxical in so far as context dependence reduces validity while, on the other hand, "validity of a theory is partially defined by its ability to remain intrinsically related to and compatible with the actor's own account of what is going on" (Carr and Kemmis, 1988: p 92). Merit can therefore only be judged in terms of the worth or value of the research in the context in which it was conceived and operates. Having said that, if a piece of research 'rings true' to others in the field, the goals and intentions suggested in the research findings are likely to be shared by many art educators. Geahigan (1998: p 12) draws the analogy between effective art research and the role of the art critic;

> *Conclusions about merit or worth have a wider applicability as well, for what is worthwhile in a critic's present experience of a work of art also becomes a principle for evaluating other works in the future.*

For people to feel that a piece of research is valid they need to have a sense of association or link with what is being described. An account will ring true in a broader context if it has aesthetic finality, consistency, conviction, closure and authenticity. Research has to involve praxis, where there is informed, committed action and reflective dialogue and action (Usher, 1996: p 24). Art research has often been more concerned with describing the problem than the development of alternative practices. A lack of collaborative problem resolution has engendered a belief that academic art research offers very little to the practitioner. Davis (1977, in Lahr, 1984: p 119) points to the need for greater pragmatic application of art research;

> *We can no longer afford the luxury of simply doing research exercises in the arts. Our research must count: and it must count toward the accumulation of a body of knowledge that will guide our efforts in developing quality instruction in art, which will ultimately improve the quality of life for every individual who comes under our guidance and tutelage.*

A differentiation is made at this point between 'practice' and 'institutions'. Practice may change as the result of research without changing the institution. Conversely, research may change an institution without changing the practices within that organization. The extent of integration of new theories into practice is largely dependent on the will and abilities of the participants.

The researcher

The positioning of the researcher in critical aesthetic inquiry is not objective, rational or positivist. The researcher does not take a disinterested or neutral stance. Like looking at an artwork in a gallery, the viewer is an integral part of the construction of that artwork. Similarly, in critical aesthetic research the researcher brings to the study personal values and interests. The researcher does not try to suppress or bracket out subjectivity and assume a disinterested pose. Researchers in a critical aesthetic inquiry need a great deal of sensitivity to be able to perceive things in a special way. Perception is not an objective act, and not all aesthetic judgements are equally sensitive or discriminating. While knowledge is undoubtedly important in aesthetic inquiry, the skill of perception is even more vital. Perception is context dependent. As Broudy (1976: p 93) states, "aesthetic perception is complete, not selective; it is intensive, confined within the borders of the work of art." Perception is effected by subjective moods. Researchers using critical aesthetic inquiry need to develop perceptual skills and enhance their ability to make sensory responses. Two people looking at the same painting may describe it in different ways. Both people are describing accurately the features they perceive but they may be attuning to different features of the scene, or they may be attuned to the same feature, but use different predicates to describe the object. Critical aesthetic inquiry clearly involves not only the ability of heightened perception but also narrative and descriptive skills necessary to communicate perceived experience.

Conclusion

Research using critical aesthetic inquiry is not about homogeneity of perception. Distinctions, values and dissonance all heighten perception and make for a richer and more creative picture of art education practice. As a socio-cultural form of research, critical aesthetic inquiry is concerned with participation and action within a setting. Critical aesthetic inquiry is a sound approach to researching art education as it captures the elements of artistic expression within the constructs of a sound research methodology. Art, as a skill, is applied to the design of this research approach. Critical aesthetic inquiry provides an instrument for advanced study of art education practices. The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998:p 93) defines the fine arts as those practices where mind and imagination are chiefly concerned. Critical aesthetic inquiry is conceived as providing the 'fine arts' for researching the art of generalist art education.

There is a Chinese legend that tells the story of a beautiful horse that runs around madly up in the clouds. The horses working away in the fields below, look up at the beautiful horse and deride the horse saying, "look at that crazy horse running around in the sky while we get on with the work down here." Nevertheless, the beautiful horse is not deterred and continues to run around in the clouds. Over time, the horses on the

ground get curious and gallop up into the clouds to try to see what the crazy horse is up to. When the workhorses get up in the clouds, they realize that from that position they can see the whole world. The patterns in the field make sense. The workhorses join the horse in the clouds and continue to gallop where they can see clearly and enjoy the 'big picture.' Critical aesthetic inquiry is generally accepted as 'the crazy horse' in art educational research, but I am starting to see other horses working in all sorts of fields wondering what the crazy horse is up to and perhaps they can come up into the clouds so they can see their own field in a more holistic and clear way.

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